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Latin Debate Refocused

Reports of C.I.A. Role in Nicaragua Mining Stir New Doubts in Congress on Covert Acts

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WASHINGTON, April 8 — The mining of Nicaraguan harbors, reportedly under the direct supervision of the Central Intelligence Agency, has rekindled doubts in Congress and among some officials in the Reagan Administration about the extensive use of covert activities to advance United States interests in Central America.

As details about the mining and the direct involvement of the C.I.A. have been disclosed in recent days by both Administration officials and members of Congress, the operation has become the focus of attention in a debate about the Administration's policies in Central America.

The primary concern expressed by Administration and Congressional opponents of the mining is that it has irritated American allies in Europe and risked an incident between the United States and the Soviet Union without a clearly compensating benefit to American interests in Central America.

The laying of the mines, in the harbors of key Nicaraguan ports, is said to have begun about two months ago.

Soviet Tanker Was Damaged

The Soviet Union made a formal protest to the United States last month when a Soviet tanker, the Lugansk, was damaged by a mine as it approached Puerto Sandino on the Pacific coast of Nicaragua. Last week France offered to help Nicaragua remove the mines, and Britain told the Administration that it disapproved of the mining as interference with international shipping.

Proponents of the mining, including intelligence and Defense Department officials, contend that it is an effective tactic of harassment against Nicaragua and is justified under international law because Nicaragua is supporting aggression by leftist guerrillas in El Salvador.

In addition, the proponents said, the risk of provoking American allies or the Soviet Union is limited by the nature of the mines, which they described as powerful enough to damage but not sink foreign ships.

But critics of the mining, including some officials at the State Department, said it represented a major increase in American covert activities against Nicaragua that was undertaken without adequate consideration by Congress. "Mining harbors comes close to an act of war," one Democratic member of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence said, "but because it's part of a covert operation, normal debate was short-circuited."

Another Democrat on the committee, Senator Patrick J. Leahy of Vermont, said today: "When you substitute covert activity for a foreign policy, you run into exactly this problem. Covert activities should be used only on a limited scale for very specific purposes."

Opposition in House

Leading Democrats in the House, in part because of concern about the mining, are opposed to providing the C.I.A. with additional funds to support covert operations against Nicaragua. These opponents include Representatives Edward P. Boland of Massachusetts, the chairman of the House Select Committee on Intelligence, and Lee H. Hamilton of Indiana, both moderate Democrats whose views are widely respected by colleagues. An aide to Representative Bill Alexander of Arkansas, the chief deputy majority whip, said the mining has helped galvanize opposition to increasing the funds.

The last time the United States openly mined foreign harbors was in 1972, when President Nixon ordered the mining of all North Vietnamese ports to prevent the flow of arms and supplies. Critics of the Nicaraguan mining said that unlike Mr. Nixon's action, which became the subject of heated debate as soon as it was announced, the mining of Nicaraguan ports was conducted in secret and entered public discussion only because of unauthorized disclosures.

Although the critics remain a minority in the Administration and in the Republican-controlled Senate, they appear in combination with House Democrats to have sufficient strength to force at least a reappraisal of the mining. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan,

Democrat of New York and deputy chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said Friday that he thought Congressional opposition would eventually force an end to the mining.

Senate Voted More Funds

Last week the Senate voted 76 to 19 to provide \$21 million in new funds for the C.I.A. this year to support Nicaraguan rebel activities, including the mining. Fifty-three Republicans and 23 Democrats, including Mr. Moynihan, supported the measure, which also contained \$61.75 million in additional military aid to El Salvador.

There is widespread opposition to the \$21 million in the House, which voted twice within the last year to cut off funds for Nicaraguan rebels.

Mr. Leahy said senators should have been aware of the mining when they voted on the \$21 million appropriation last week because Senator Barry M. Goldwater, the chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, inadvertently referred to the covert operation in floor debate. Mr. Leahy said Mr. Goldwater, an Arizona Republican, later had his remarks deleted from the Congressional Record. Mr. Goldwater could not be reached for comment today in Washington or Arizona.

Because the mining was part of a covert operation, other senators said, it did not receive the attention it warranted. "Barry did mention it, but that was a mistake, and we certainly didn't have a detailed report or discussion," a Republican Senator said today.

Most Senators Unaware

The Senator said most members of the Senate were not fully aware of the C.I.A.'s role in the mining, which involves three Nicaraguan ports, El Bluff on the Atlantic and Puerto Sandino and Puerto Corinto on the Pacific.

He said most senators did not know until a report published today that Americans working for the C.I.A. on a ship off the Pacific coast had been supervising the mining. This was the first time since the United States began supporting the Nicaraguan rebels three years ago that Americans have become directly involved in military operations against the Sandinista Government.

Administration officials have said that the actual placement of the mines inside Nicaraguan territorial waters is handled by an elite group of Latin American commandos who use small, high-speed boats to penetrate shipping lanes close to shore. The Americans, according to intelligence officials, remain aboard the headquarters ship that stays outside Nicaraguan waters.

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